



Conversation with Steve King

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me about your organization?

Steve King: My name is Steve King, and I'm the executive director of the Oakland Community Land Trust. We've been around for nearly 15 years. The organization was incorporated in 2009 in Oakland at the height of the foreclosure crisis that was really bearing down on Oakland. For several years preceding that, a group of residents, who were members of the Oakland Chapter of ACORN, were organizing around predatory lending and the impacts they were starting to see amongst their members of those predatory loans as they became foreclosure issues.

Those ACORN members started working with the organization where I was working at the time, called Urban Strategies Council, a long-time social justice organization based in Oakland that was founded by Angela Glover Blackwell before she started PolicyLink. Urban Strategies Council provided technical support to the residents from ACORN to form a new community land trust in Oakland. It was seen as an opportune time with that severe crisis hitting the city, and an opportunity for the community to regain control of land and housing through a community land trust. That was the organizing impetus around creating a new entity to do that work in Oakland, and that's the origin story.

Ashley Hopkinson: There are a few other community land trusts in Northern California in that particular area, but at the time you were starting, did you guys feel like Oakland needed something distinctive, that was within its city limits, to be able to make a difference?

Steve King: Yes, there were a couple of existing community land trusts at the time, like the Northern California Land Trust, which has been around for about 50 years in California. There was a sense among leaders that were starting Oak CLT that we really needed something that was place-based, very

focused on Oakland, that had a more rooted governance structure that could really create a different level of self-determination for residents of Oakland in the flatland neighborhoods that the CLT was focused on, where the foreclosure crisis was hitting the hardest. So I think it just made sense to create a really Oakland centered organization that had grassroots leadership at the core of the organization at its founding.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the time that you've been with the organization, is there anything that you can point to whether it's a program or a practice that you feel is a marker of the potential of what community land trusts could really do?

Steve King: When the organization was started in 2009, there was a considerable amount of skepticism around the model in Oakland and it is not as accepted as it is now. I mean, talking about removing land from the speculative market, talking about community control of land and housing. Those were not common terms in community development at that time, or in affordable housing in particular. So there was incredible skepticism from political officials in Oakland, from the affordable housing industry. Frankly, traditional affordable housing nonprofits work against this effort, so just a real different time that's hard to imagine actually at this point, at least in our context in the Bay Area.

So the initial project that we were engaged in around acquiring vacant foreclosed homes and creating permanently affordable ownership opportunities was really challenging, that we were fighting against speculators who were swooping in to buy up those homes, and we're really at a disadvantage at the time to acquire those properties, and we're still fighting the after effects of that now, where single family rental housing owned by hedge funds and Wall Street firms is now a business that didn't exist when we started, so that's become just a countervailing force that we're constantly dealing with the speculative impacts of how housing is being treated in that context, so that was a slow build for us working through that project.

The turning point came for us when we started a different trajectory of talking with our organizing partners in Oakland and around us, and broadening our perspective to consider the acquisition of occupied properties where tenants were at risk of being evicted or displaced. Previously, we'd been buying vacant foreclosed homes, so we weren't stabilizing people in place, we were stabilizing housing. So this kind of shift towards really addressing the emergent change in the market where tenants were becoming severely at risk for a number of different factors became the new focus for us. Once we completed a couple of successful projects where we've partnered with tenants who were at risk and purchased their buildings, and were able to really demonstrate that that consent-based partnership where we go in directly with a group of residents and we agree upon a shared vision and purchase a property collectively, I think really set a different trajectory for us and awareness of the

possibility of the community land trust as a model to really hold space and prevent displacement in a new way.

Ashley Hopkinson: So very much still working toward a housing affordability problem but in a new way, people on the edge of being pushed out?

Steve King: Yes and in a place like Oakland where there's actually relatively strong tenant protections, we were seeing from our organizing partners on the ground a lot of immigrant tenants in Oakland that may not know their rights or they're afraid to exercise their rights because of their status. Investors and speculators were finding all kinds of nefarious ways to displace folks. And so demonstrating that there is a different path when a building goes up for sale, that it doesn't necessarily have to be a different investor that swoops in and swaps out old tenants for new higher paying ones. I think we've demonstrated at this point that that's not the given trajectory. There are alternative pathways for it that are viable if they're supported.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the case of going in and getting a multifamily building where the tenants are on board, they want to stay and want to make it work, what do you think helps that to succeed? And in the time that you've been doing that, what are the lessons you've gleaned from being able to make that happen?

Steve King: There's a whole range of things, and we're frankly still figuring it out. We're still in the weeds of it, but I would say one, our orientation to that approach is from the start has been doing it, like I said, in partnership with tenants. We are not out looking to just buy any building that's for sale. We utilize our capacity to where we're essentially invited in by a group of tenants, and we work with them to make sure that we have a shared vision on what it means to partner with the land trust, what it means for us to come in and buy the building and end up being a landlord for a few years while we figure out the pathway to create resident ownership of the building and the community land trust. So I wouldn't say it's an easy trajectory to do all of that, but our approach has really been to do that with the consent of residents, with the partnership of residents, otherwise it just doesn't work. To impose this model on a group of residents is obviously counter to what we believe in and on the backend, it just wouldn't be successful in terms of creating the shared ownership models that we're hoping to build, so I would say that's one, just our orientation to the work and towards partnership.

Then the other piece around success is, and maybe the more limiting factor for us, is just the availability of financing and funding for this kind of work. We've had some moderate success in working with the city of Oakland around creating funding sources to support the small scale resident centered preservation. That is rare. It doesn't exist in almost all communities, so we really needed to

do a considerable amount of organizing and advocacy to create those funding sources. So I would say that's just a nuance in the work and it's really consistent across the board for community land trusts generally. The work has never been supported financially at any scale really. So there's often criticism of the model for not getting to scale, but it's just frankly never been supported like other forms of affordable housing. We're starting to see how the model can start to scale once funding starts to flow towards it as a viable pathway.

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you found that one way of managing that particular challenge, in addition to, of course, continuing to look for funding streams is taking it one project at a time? What has been something that has helped you manage that as a very real obstacle?

Steve King: I think it's just built into the way we've been growing. We're still a small organization. We only have a staff of seven, and three or four of those are part-time. So we're a small community-based organization that's effectively taken on a lot, but I think there is a natural limitation to what we can do as we grow and how many projects we can acquire. The framing, your question is actually right. We've built upon previous successes where we demonstrated something where, "Wow, that worked." Maybe there's a positive news story or press around a project that then other tenants see and (then) approach us about partnering. We partnered with [Moms 4 Housing](#), and that was an international story, that was in Oakland that really garnered a lot of attention to the work, not just for us, but for CLTs around the country and maybe even around the world of just highlighting the possibility of using it as a tool to preserve housing for community. So there's been a slow build of having these successful projects that we can point to as examples. Many of our projects look different. We've been almost agnostic to how we use the CLT as a tool when we're asked to partner with a group of residents, and it's a live-work building of working artists or a mixed use building with commercial space on the ground floor and residents upstairs. We're just like, "Okay, let's figure out how we can use this tool to make it work," and it's flexible enough, which is a beautiful thing about the community land trusts. It's flexible enough to accommodate all these different creative ownership structures that accomplish what any given group of residents might want to see with their housing and commercial space, or community gardens or whatever.

Ashley Hopkinson: I was having a conversation a few minutes ago, and the person I was talking to said, our systems are not really set up for us to do things in a collective way, and so we don't always have the structures we need. What does it mean to partner with Oakland Community Land Trust? Can you explain that for someone who's not familiar with how land trusts work?

Steve King: There's a lot of truth to that comment. So if we're partnering with a group of residents in a fourteen-unit building, for instance, there are very few examples in our culture of shared ownership in

a multi-person context in a community-centered way. Obviously businesses, LLCs have multiple owners, but that's all profit-oriented. When you're coming around to do this work in a democratic way where you've got a democratic decision-making structure, where you're owning something collectively around your shelter, (there are) very few examples of where that exists. We don't learn how to practice that kind of democracy in a direct way with our neighbors or people down the hall. That's been a real learning experience for us: having to take a step back and (determine) how do we build that capacity and expertise with our residents to be able to do that together, it's hard. That's one of the hardest things I think we're doing, building that trust capacity, ability of people to just be, hold space together and make decisions together around a collective purpose to reframe the traditional landlord-tenant relationship to see that we own it together... It's a completely different way of being in relation to your shelter.

Ashley Hopkinson: Who are the people that you're looking to in terms of partnering to be able to do this work? Do you rely on a legal team, grassroots organizations or foundation partners? Who is helping you along the journey of figuring out how to continue to sustain this work?

Steve King: That's a constant thing that's always evolving. When we started, there was hardly anything out there in terms of support other than other community land trusts that had been around for a while. There was a national community land trust network as a membership organization that could offer some technical assistance in terms of some of the nuts and bolts. Now that we've moved into this more, resident-centered cooperative work, at least on the West Coast in California, there isn't a real culture around cooperative ownership. In terms of housing, we have a very strong growing movement around worker-owned cooperatives and the employment realm where folks own businesses collectively, but still, the culture around owning housing together is still new. It's still a pain point for us, "Where do we turn to? Who do we learn from?"

There's tons of legal questions that are outstanding for us. I just got off a call with one of my staff where we're working on developing bylaws for a limited equity housing cooperative and just a whole litany of questions that we don't effectively know the answer to, or that there's ambiguity around which direction we should go. We consistently find ourselves in these positions where there isn't a roadmap for what we're planning on doing. So it's incredible to have other CLTs, other housing cooperatives that have done similar things before to commiserate with them and hear their experience. So many times we find ourselves in positions where we're needing to make decisions that effectively haven't been made before, and so we're building a ship as it's sailing and hoping for the best, and (we're) grateful for our residents that are on the journey with us and taking that leap of faith

to create these new models. It's a very interesting time to be doing this work, and exhausting, and often challenging just because we don't have a model roadmap to look at, to replicate.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision makers could do to help move the needle forward? Is it more city partnerships like you mentioned? What do you think would be something that would be a value add at this time?

Steve King: The biggest thing would be for all levels of government to have a broader recognition (of housing). That just traditional renting and owning are not the only ways of existing in housing, that there is a more complicated (and) nuanced landscape of tenure that people experience. We need to think about it in a more complex way. The fact is that pretty much all levels of government that fund affordable housing, just don't have the bucket to fund these kinds of projects. So to the extent we can move the needle on expanding opportunities for these innovative models, I think that would go a long way towards enabling communities to do what we're doing. There are many entities out there that are effectively creating their own roadmap like we're doing, and we get calls all the time from organizations around the country like, 'How did you do that project?' It's clear that there's a demand for it, but we just haven't created the enabling environment that really will allow it to flourish around the country. There are a lot of ways that through policy and funding that can be done. It just requires political will.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow and expand for community land trusts to really have a runway to be able to move forward?

Steve King: Legitimizing the model in the eyes of an entire industry and economy, but then actually providing some resourcing to move it alongside other examples of affordable housing that we've seen scale when the government has poured money into them. We could similarly see that across community land trusts, limited equity housing cooperatives in the worker-owned cooperative space, in terms of, business opportunity and economic opportunity for folks. When we invest in those things, they can grow. We just haven't done it.

Ashley Hopkinson: When you reach out and ask questions about how someone does something or when people reach out to you, what's your most common response around your biggest how-to or insight?

Steve King: I don't know if this is the most effective thing to share but it's literally commiserating with people that are in the weeds trying to do the same thing, for us reaching out to folks and for folks reaching out to us. It is just so comforting to know that you're not in it alone and that other people are

struggling with the same kinds of things that are literally driving you crazy because there isn't that road map. Often the most valuable thing is to be able to have a network of like-minded folks that are trying to do similar things. It could (be to) get into the weeds of some creative financing thing we did, or how we worked with tenants around certain issues around conflict transformation. It can just go down so many different rabbit holes because the work is so complex and varied around financing and social cohesion, and just architectural things (such as) building rehabilitation. There's so many aspects. There's never a dull day.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define well being as it relates to housing and land?

Steve King: What we're really aiming for through this work in terms of health and wellbeing, which I am thinking about holistically both physically and mentally, is really around self-determination and agency for folks, particularly in the kind of economic and market that we have in the Bay Area, or in the United States generally. But how difficult it can be in the Bay Area to just survive and sustain an apartment and how challenging it is to sustain shelter, to have that different relationship to shelter in a way where it's not an economic commodity. It is literally your wellbeing. Shelter is the basis for your wellbeing in every other aspect of your life. At a very fundamental level, that's what we're trying to enact by having community control of land. We're removing the profit motive out of the entire equation and ensuring that shelter is shelter, shelter is for humans. Dignified shelter is what we need, and we're trying to secure that for folks, as a platform for everything else that we would consider as aspects of wellbeing or quality of life.

Ashley Hopkinson : What do you think the potential may be in the next 10 years? Do you feel a groundswell and optimism towards community land trusts and what the next 10 years can look like?

Steve King: I do have a lot of hope in that direction, particularly in California. In the past five or six years, the number of community land trusts throughout the state has more than doubled. It's clear that there's a growing demand for the work and a growing understanding of what a community land trust is and what the possibilities are for it as a tool. The fact that there is that sort of the base level understanding or awareness— that level has rapidly increased since in our fifteen-year time span of being around. That is encouraging to me, that I can go talk to a council member here or a state legislator without having to define what a community land trust is to set the context, that we've gotten to a place where there's at least that level of understanding. So now we can start having a deeper conversation about what's needed to move the work forward, that's really encouraging.

Community land trusts are really popping up in LA. There hasn't been a culture of CLTs there like in the Bay Area, and so there's real neighborhood-based community land trusts focused around values and aligned work. I see it being a hopeful time, particularly in California. I don't have a strong enough sense of the pulse around the country, but a lot of people are also looking to California as the model's growing and how it's scaling around the state, so hopefully that can be an inspiration and model for other folks.

Ashley Hopkinson : That was great Steve, thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*